Famous Thief and Thief-Taker

MR. JOHN SWEENEY'S detective reminiscences, "At Scotland Yard," and the extarordinary arrest and commital by the police of one of their own spies, John William Camp, set me re-reading a book that fascinated my boyhood, the "Life of Vidocq"—certainly the most crafty, daring and successful of criminals when crime was his trade, and of detectives when he had turned thief-trapper. It is odd to think that the most successful entertained in London in the year 1845 was this treacherous scoundrel. Vast and fashionable crowds ocked to hear him in the Cosmorama tell the extraordinary story of his life. He donned his chains, his galley dress and the huge iron ball which he had worn at Brest; and, as he told his stories, he changed his face irrecognizably again and again, appearing successtively as a pickpocket, a coal heaver, a galley slave, a Jew, a scullion and a nun.

Vidocq had in a month as many adventures as most desperadoes have in a lifetime. Here is the record of a few weeks' experiences. For an assault on a rival, whom he surprised supping with his mistress, Francine, in a tavern, he was imprisoned in Lille in St. Peter's tower. Hither Francine brought him daily, and piecemeal, in her muff, the uniform of a police inspector, which Vidocq donned, and, with a face which his own mother would have failed to recognize—for he had a Garrick's power of mimicry—he walked boldly to the prison gate. The gatekeeper, an old galley slave, sharp-eyed as a lynx, saluted the police inspector, and threw open the gate with eager deference. Instead of lying a while Perdu, Vidocq next day swaggered through the town, enjoying the hue and cry after himself he heard at every turn. He had hardly sat down to dinner in a tavern when a sergeant and four men came thither for him.

Vidocq went straight up to the sergeant and said: "If you are looking for that scoundrel, Vidocq, hide here in this closet, and the moment he enters I shall let you know." When the sergeant and his men had packed themselves into the closet, Vidocq turned the key, and, shouting: "It is Vidocq himself who has locked you in!" bolted. Three days later, however, he was caught and locked up in a dungeon with a criminal called Calendrin, who had already worked a secret hole half through the wall, which in another three days, with Vidocq's help, became an apparently practicable breach. Vidocqu, having stripped himself stark naked, thrust his body half through the hole, which then gripped him like a trap. He was horribly lacerated and had to shriek for the guards to extricate him.

A week later his trial come an, and, with eighteen other culprits, he was taken to the court, and waited there in an ante-room for his turn to be arraigned. The prisoners were attended by two gendarmes within the anteroom, while without it was guarded by a corporal and a troop of soldiers. One of the two gendarmes, having been summoned into the court, left behind him his hat and cloak, which Vidocq donned instantly, and, taking another prisoner by the arm, he led him to the door, which the corporal threw open to them, and both were free! But the reckless Vidocq was never free for long. He was flung in prison on the charge of attempting to murder Francine—who had stabbed herself in despair of his love—but from this dungeon he escaped by the carelessness of the turnkey. Again taken, and flung into a dungeon whose walls were five feet thick, he, with the help of two other desperadoes, dug down beneath them, only to find, when the last stone was kocked out, that they had broken into the river Scarpe, which ooded, and almost drowned them like rats! Nevertheless Vidocq a day or two later effected his escape by springing from the coach in which he was being conveyed to another prison.

The Prince of Detectives.

These early adventures of Vidocq are remarkable only for being crowded into so short a space of time. They do not compare in daring, resource, alertness and good luck with some of his galley slave experiences. But these galley slave experiences themselves pale their ineffectual fire before the number, daring and success of his exploits as a detective. During the eighteen years of his detective service he cleared the slums of Paris of more than 20,000 rogues.

Not the least daring of his detective exploits was his first—his capture, single-handed, of one of the fiercest, craftiest and physically most powerful of all the desperadoes of Paris—Watrin, the coiner. Having tracked Watrin to his lair, above a cobbler's shop, he went at midnight, single-handed, to the spot, and, meeting the coiner in the doorway, he rushed upon him, only to receive a tremendous blow which almost stunned him. Watrin retreated into the cobbler's shop, and armed himself with a knife, which would have dealt certain death to the unarmed Vidocq if he had followed the coiner into his lair.

Vidocq, therefore, pretented to retire, making a sound as of steps retreating, which tempted Watrin to put his head out of the window to make sure of his enemy's departure; whereupon Vidocq, seizing him by the hair, dragged him by sheer strength of muscle through the window, and, wrenching the knife from Watrin's grasp, he bound his arms and, single-handed, hauled him to the guard house, to the amazement of M. Henri, the chief of the police, and all of his staff.

Even on his deathbed, at the ripe age of 82, Vidocq played with his usual thoroughness and success a double part. Finding his end near, he sent for a priest, whom he edified by his profound penitence and unctuous devotion. Hardly, however, had the breath left his body than no less than ten young women appeared, each claiming to be his sole heir, and each backing her claim by the production of a will, in which this aged Lothario had left her all his worldly goods! All ten went empty away, however, since Vidocq had finally bequeathed his entire property to his landlady.

A Famous Prison Breaker.

Vidocq's adventurous life and edifying end recall those of Casanova, an expurgated edition of whose memoirs appeared a year or two since. The Inquisition had flung him, on a charge of sorcery, into one of the cells of the Piombi, in Venice—a cell under the leads, in which it was impossible to stand upright, lighted only through a narrow grating above the door, but heated by the raging sun to the temperature of an oven.

While his cell was being swept out, Casanova was allowed to walk in the corridor, where one day he found in a heap of rubbish an iron bolt, two feet long and one inch thick, and a fragment of black marble, both of which he managed to smuggle beneath his coat into his cell. There he set to work to grind the bolt into a point upon the piece of marble, intending to pierce the cell floor, lower himself by ropes made out of strips of his bedding into the hall of the Inquisitors beneath, where would lie in wait until the door was opened, and then make a desperate rush to regain freedom.

By pretending to have a toothache—for which a gun flnt steeped in vinegar was supposed to be a cure—he obtained a couple of flnts from his jailer, and with these he struck a light from tinder made out of a scrap of the stuffing of his coat. But on the very day on which the planks were at last pierced he was transferred to another cell! Then, of course, the hole in the floor was discovered and trhe discovery redoubled the vigilance of the furious jailer. Nevertheless, Casanova contrived to smuggle his tool into the next cell, and to instruct the monk confined therein to pierve the ceiling of his cell, climb into the intervening space between it and the roof, and make a hole in Casanova's ceiling. In ten days the monk had pierced his ceiling, hiding the orifice with wooden figures of the saints, when a spy of the Inquisition was thrust into Casanova's cell.

This spy, who was even more superstitious than he was astute, Casanova persuaded into the belief that the Virgin of the Rosary had assured him in a vision that an angel would descend from the ceiling to set them free on a certain day and hour. At that day and hour the monk tumbled down through the cell ceiling into Casanova's arms. When, however, with no little difficulty they had worked their way to the roof they found that there was no hold to which to fasten their rope, and they had to break through one of the dormer windows and descend into the palace. They broke their way through windows and doors till they reached the massive front door, which was impenetrable and locked.

When morning broke Casanova donner the gorgeous clothes in which he had entered the prison, and, thrusting his head from a side grating, signaled to a passerby to summon the porter, who came trembling, thinking he had locked in overnight some Venetian magnate. Hhe uding open the great door apologetically, and Casanova and the monk passed out free.—T. P.'s Weekly.

Moccasined Dogs.

(New England Farmer.)

In Alaska even dogs wear shoes—at least part of the time. It is not on account of the cold, for a shaggy Eskimo dog will live and be frisky when a man would freeze to death. The dog does all the work of dragging and carrying, which in the country falls to the horses, and in trotting over the rough ice of the mountain passes, his feet soon become bruised and sore. Then his driver makes him soft little moccasins of buckskin or reindeer skin, and ties them on with stout thongs of leather. In this way he will travel easily, until his feet are thoroughly healed up; then he bites and tears his shoes with his sharp, wolflike teeth, and eats them up.

Wonderful animals are these dogs of Alaska. Although they are only little fellows—not more than half the size of a big Newfoundland—they sell from $75 to $250 each, more than an ordinary horse will sell for in this country. They will draw 300 pounds each on a sled, and they are usually driven in teams of six. They need no lines to guide them, for they readily obey the sound of their master's voice, turning or stopping at a word.

But the Eskimo dogs have their faults. Like many boys, they are overfond of having good things to eat. Consequently they have to be watched closely, or they will attack and devour stores left in their way, especially bacon, which must be hung out of their reach. At night, when camp is pitched, the moment a blanket is thrown upon the ground they will into it and curl up, and neither cuffs nor kicks suffice the budge them. They lie as close to the men who own them as possible, and the miner cannot wrap himself so close that they won't get under the blanket with him. They are human, too, in their disinclination to get out in the morning.

Boy Trials.

(Philadelphia Bulletin.)

Willie—I earned a nickel today.

Father—Are you sure? How much did you do?

Willie—Oh, I moved the piano and beat the parlor rug and emptied all the ashes.

Father—Well, a nickel is a whole lot of money.

Not Tested Yet.

(Philadelphia Press.)

Cassidy—'Tis a foine red flannel shirt ye hov on ye.

Casey—Ay! 'tis foine stuff and a great bargain.

Cassidy—It looks good, but does it shrink in the washin'?

Casey—I dunno. Shure, Oi've only had it a mont'.